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SUBJECT: NIGER/France: ENCOURAGING DEMOCRACY

PARIS 00006611 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Encouraging the development of Niger's budding democracy is France's principal concern for that country, according to MFA desk officer Michael Deslaimes. France shares the U.S.'s general approach to Niger. In the GOF view, Niger enjoys relative stability when compared with its neighbors. However, its democratic tradition is not strong and it remains a very poor country with limited resources. According to Deslaimes, Niger so far has not suffered significant negative spillover from Chad or Sudan, in part because it is more oriented to its west and south rather than east and southeast. Ethnic friction exists between the government and the Toubou population but this is a centuries-old condition that both sides seem to be managing, he explained. NGOs are active in Niger (sometimes more than in more repressive places) and are a factor in carrying out diplomacy, according to Deslaimes. In his view, "thinking big" but "acting small" may be the best way to effect change in Niger. France is in the process of finalizing a Partnership Framework agreement for channeling its assistance to Niger during the 2006-2010 period, with a focus on education, health care, and water resource management. END SUMMARY.

Encouraging Democracy

¶2. (C) MFA Niger desk officer Michael Deslaimes on October 2 provided a concise overview of Niger and France/Niger relations to transiting Embassy Niamey Pol/Cons officer Richard Roberts. Deslaimes said that France's priority in Niger was to promote democracy, which had taken root after a lengthy period of military rule. He noted that the military and Niger's elites had concluded that that form of government was not likely to take Niger in the right direction and had instead opted for a more democratic approach, which was bearing fruit. Deslaimes said that Mali had been in a similar position and had also chosen democracy, but the two countries had differing approaches. Malians stressed the importance of consensus. In Deslaimes's view, however, striving for consensus could sometimes stifle the democratic process by discouraging or watering down divergent views. In contrast, Deslaimes described Niger's democracy as more open and free-wheeling. He indicated that Niger's approach seemed more effective.

¶3. (C) At several points Deslaimes said that he believed that France and the U.S. shared a common view of Niger and were working towards the same goals -- encouraging democracy and economic development. He remarked that USG and GOF elements in Niger worked well together and that there seemed

to be no policy differences between the U.S. and France.

Little Spillover from the East

14. (C) Deslaimes said that Niger's relative stability stood in stark contrast to the situation in neighboring countries, particularly those to the east (i.e., Chad and Sudan). Fortunately for Niger, the spillover from the instability and violence in those countries had been minimal. This was in part because Niger historically tended to look more towards its west and immediate south rather than to its east and southeast, whereas as Chad and Sudan were oriented more towards their east and immediate south. Deslaimes commented on the very old and proud cultural traditions that existed in Niger, which outsiders sometimes, to their detriment, overlooked.

Friction with the Toubou

15. (C) The one ethnic problem of concern in Niger involved the Toubou minority. This was a centuries-old issue, Deslaimes said, based in large measure on the nomadic and fragmented nature of Toubou society -- "they do not view themselves as 'governed' by anyone, and do not enjoy any unity even among themselves." Deslaimes said that the Toubou and GON had arrived at a "gentleman's agreement," with both sides tacitly agreeing on certain limits that both would respect. For example, Deslaimes said that Toubous drifting into Niger from Chad had reached an understanding with Niger's border security forces that they would leave their weapons at the border and reclaim them should they happen to return to the Chad side.

NGOs and "Thinking Big but Acting Small"

16. (C) Deslaimes said that NGOs were quite active in Niger and were a factor to be considered by diplomatic missions operating there. He noted that, paradoxically, NGOs in

PARIS 00006611 002.2 OF 002

relatively open countries like Niger were often more critical of host governments than were NGOs in more repressive countries, where they tended to be ignored or pressured into silence. (Deslaimes hastened to add that he was not saying Niger was a completely open society, only that it was more open than a number of other less-developed nations, particularly in its part of Africa.) NGOs often lobbied the French Embassy in Niamey to support reform aggressively in Niger, an approach that Deslaimes said had to be balanced within the larger context of France-Niger relations and what France was trying to accomplish there. Deslaimes suggested that outsiders had to be careful to woo as well as push in order to effect change, which NGOs sometimes did not seem to take into account. Deslaimes remarked that in Niger, one should "think big" (democracy, rule of law, good governance) but "act small" (better to provide school supplies to 25 village schools than to fund costly travel-abroad programs for two or three members of the elite).

Partnership Framework Agreement

17. (C) Deslaimes said that France was in the process of concluding a Partnership Framework agreement with Niger, which he thought could be signed within the coming weeks. (NOTE: The GOF's recently initiated Partnership Framework program is now the vehicle for channeling French assistance to a recipient country, over a five-year period. The framework concept contains built-in flexibility, allowing agreements and their components to be modified over the course of an accord in response to changing circumstances. END NOTE.) Although refraining from providing specific figures (which had perhaps not yet been finalized), Deslaimes said the agreement with Niger would focus on education, health care, and water resource management (both urban and rural).

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